DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 371 335 CS 011 764

AUTHOR King, James R.; And Others
TITLE Is Resistance Empowerment? Using Critical Literacy with Teachers.
PUB DATE 12 Dec 93
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Reading Forum (Sanibel Island, FL, December 12, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Research; Course Descriptions; Elementary Education; Higher Education; Reading Research; *Resistance (Psychology); *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Behavior; Teacher Student Relationship; *Theory Practice Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Critical Literacy; Empowerment

ABSTRACT

A case study examined implementation of a critical literacy perspective (in both course content and course processes) in a Master's level course in the supervision of reading. Subjects were 10 married, white, female teachers. The course engaged in the interrogation of the teachers' literacy beliefs, teaching approaches, and schools' curricula in literacy. Data included fieldnotes, audiotapes, and teachers' writing. One of the major findings was that the teachers systematically resisted the use of critical theories. The teachers declined to use critical literacy approaches in their own classes, they did not attempt to control the course, and they refused to talk about the course. The teachers seemed to understand the concept of the new literacy and were even fluent in their discussions and writings about its premises and merits. A separation between the critical theory of the course and the practice of teachers remained a consistent feature of the course. Teachers explained the boundaries of appropriate and inappropriate behaviors as ways of keeping themselves out of trouble. The instructor of the course learned about defensiveness, about an asexuality that permeates nice teacher culture, and about how they all participate together in masking and muting topics that cause discomfort because they are construed as inappropriate. The researchers realized that their characterization of the subjects as poor critical theorists was problematic--it privileged the university and its priorities over the daily, socially-based understandings of the teachers in their public school work. (Contains 19 references.) (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 371 335

Is Resistance Empowerment?

Using Critical Literacy with Teachers

James R. King
Scot Danforth
Susan Perez
University of South Florida
Norman A. Stahl
Northern Illinois University

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

N. Stahl

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Paper Delivered at the Annual Conference of the American Reading Forum on December 12, 1993 at Sanibel Island, Florida

Direct correspondence to

James R. King, Chilhood Education, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL 33620

CS011764

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Is Resistance Empowerment?
Using Critical Literacy with Teachers

Current writing in literacy, as well as educational texts in general, suggests that empowerment is a desired state for learners and their teachers. While the construct of empowerment has been treated to several passes of analysis (Clark, 1990; Ellsworth, 1989; Lewis & Simon, 1986), we have yet to understand how teachers' authority and the rules that are implicit in their classrooms interact with agendas of empowerment that are based on critical approaches to literacy. Giroux (1987) has described Graves' approach to literacy as a critical pedagogy. Yet, its application by adult teachers in their own learning contexts is less well articulated. The following is a case study of implementing a critical literacy perspective (in both course content and course processes) in a Masters' level course.

Project Overview

This project involved a group of ten teachers who were enrolled in a graduate course in the Supervision of Reading. The teachers commuted to this evening class from local school districts where they taught elementary and secondary students. Two of the students did not currently teach. All teachers were married, white, and female. In their Master's degree in Reading program, instruction has typically taken the form of traditional lectures, research papers, and semester examinations on the roles

and responsibilities of reading supervisors. This course was based on two texts that dealt with a critical analysis of literacy education (Shannon's Broken Promises, and Willensky's The New Literacy). The course that used the texts was syllabus driven at the beginning, with readings, a written response paper, and an inservice module. Class discussion and activities occurred in a circle of desks. Jim offered this provisional syllabus and explicitly invited the teachers' revisions.

The course also involved the professor and two participant observers. The observers, who were doctoral students in education, attended all class meetings. The two observers were enrolled for three credit hours of qualitative research design, and used the master's course as a research context and project. In effect, this created two parallel courses operating in the same time/space. A final participant was the instructor for both courses. He solicited the participation of the observers to monitor his interaction with the Master's students, referred to as "teachers." As the study evolved, the self-analysis and transformation of the instructor, Jim, became a third, simultaneous course. Gradually, the roles of the observers shifted to that of observing participants.

Sue, and Scot (the observers) both recorded field notes in context to capture the events of the Master's level course. They also interviewed, both formally and informally, student members of the course. Jim, Sue and Scot spent 1-2 hours following each of the fourteen course meetings in a debriefing, and in

interpretive re-construction (Ferguson, et al., 1992) of the events of that evening's course. Written narratives from these debriefings were also part of the data. In addition, Jim analyzed the written work of the students.

After the course, we analyzed the data (fieldnotes, audiotapes, teachers' writing) for patterns using a constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 1983). Our data analysis was also based on conversations about the course. That is, Scot, Susan and Jim created data as they interpreted the events of the course. In our uses of narrative vignettes, gossip, and stories, we recreated the classroom events in our talk (Clifford, 1988; Hammersley, 1992).

One of the major findings from our analysis was that the teachers systematically resisted the use of critical theories provided in the texts by Shannon (1989) and Willensky (1990). The remainder of this paper is devoted to describing the types and meanings of the ways teachers resisted critical theory.

Teachers' Ways of Resisting

Jim's agenda in the critical literacy course was to engage teachers in the interrogation of their literacy beliefs, teaching approaches, and schools' curricula in literacy. The teachers' refusal to do so can be seen as resistance. The teachers declined to use critical literacy approaches in their own classes. Further, they did not attempt to control the current course, and they refused to talk about it. To describe the course, we offer our interpretation of the teachers' resistance.

Accumulating a Degree

From our point of view, the teachers talked about their degree programs as an accumulation of courses. Taking usually one, or perhaps two, courses a semester, the teachers spoke of how many more they had to go. They talked about workload, rigor required by professors, and what course assignments were like. It seemed to us that the teachers were probably expecting an experience similar to those they had had previous courses. When the students finished this course, they would have one more sticker to paste into the degree plan.

In conversation, however, the teachers said that the current course was "different" from previous courses. Some of the teachers said that this course was the only course in which they were required to give their opinions and reactions to readings. And furthermore, they asked after all the classes they had taken, why should this course require something different from the others. The students' view of the course as a "sticker" on a record card, influenced the students' engagement with the course. Restructuring the course, or analyzing the process of the course were seen as unnecessary effort. When invited to resubmit written work that the instructor had judged lacking in personal reflection, one student commented that she had already "wasted enough time doing things the wrong way." Instead, the teachers focused on prompting Jim to clarify his requirements for their work. They wanted specification of how their work should look,

how it would be evaluated, and how evaluation relate to grades for the course. Students' specifications for task clarity seemed to preclude their willingness to take more directive roles in re-creating the course content and structure.

Comfortable with Content

The required texts for this reading course were Willensky's The New Literacy and Shannon's Broken Promises. Both texts offer critical analysis of the literacy instruction and its management provided by school contexts. Jim chose to provide an alternative interpretation to the functions of school literacies. In weekly reaction papers and in learning projects, the teachers demonstrated their understanding of critical analyses of literacy practices. The teachers supported the notion of engaging students in reading and writing that was seen as real, significant, and purposeful by the readers and writers. Reading and writing in the real (Willensky, 1990) meant that materials used by the students needed to be intrinsically meaningful. They also expressed a need for a child centered learning in preference to curriculum driven schooling. To the researchers, they seemed to understand the concept of new literacy and were even fluent in their discussions and writings about it's premises and merits.

Teachers also took a critical stance when examining the differences between the university definitions of literacy practice and those used in the schools. One teacher, Stacy, said that the use of basal reading series was considered passe at the university and that university instructors encouraged our

students to be critical of teachers who continued to use the managed instruction found in basal reading series. Stacy also told a story of how, in a different university class, she too had poked fun at her teaching colleagues' use of basal readers. Working with her teaching colleagues the next day, she realized that it was her professional friend that she had criticized. She admitted to feeling torn between her teaching friends and her university learning.

Stopping Halfway Across a Chasm

The teachers did not talk about their own teaching and classrooms in the terms of the same critical theory with which they discussed their readings. A separation between the critical theory of the course and the practice of the teachers remained a consistent feature of the course. We understood this separation in three different ways. First, the teachers had rather well specified expectations for the current course based on their experiences in previous coursework. This is the "sticker." They considered the syllabus that they received as a static statement for the course. Despite the fact that Jim encouraged them to modify the course and the syllabus, and that they were provided with examples of possible changes, they chose not to do so. In fact, they privledged the syllabus as an absolute representation for the course. The syllabus, then, defined the content and the requirements for the course.

A second way to understand separation between the teachers' readings and their teaching is the need we all have for personal

comfort. We saw the teachers drawing personal boundaries around their self-constructed roles as teachers. Once circumscribed, they were more able to articulate what lay outside the circle than what was contained within. It was equally clear that what was outside was described and objectified, but not taken in, as the following example shows. One middle school teacher invited her students to write about why they were having so much difficulty working together in groups. In our class, when she read their compositions, she admitted to being very uncomfortable in responding to the real issues and feelings in her students' writing. She was aware that this kind of real writing about real issues for purposes was what our course in critical literacy was about. Her students had written poignant vignettes which were focused on the confusion they felt about liking and disliking each other and themselves. When the teacher shared the pieces of writing in class, several of the teachers were moved to comment on the power of the writing. "I'm not a psychologist," the teacher told us. "I can't comment on them." Writing in the real, and the response it demands from the teacher were outside the circle this teacher allowed herself as a professional role.

A third way we understood the separation of practice and theory was rooted in our social construction of "appropriate" in educational contexts. In both university classes and in the teachers' stories about their own classrooms (also part of the students' university personae), a sense of appropriateness was used as a gauge for what was permissible discourse. As a group

we were hard pressed when we tried to move beyond discomfort, to the naming of the source of discomfort in ourselves. Subjects such as racism, sex, sex roles, and "dirty words," used to represent the subjects (e.g., fuck, shit, damn) were generally not approved of as discussion topics. We learned this two different ways. First, as curriculum for kids, these topics and words were not appropriate. Second, as students and teacher in our university class, these topics were awkward, made us all fidgety, and embarrassed. Also, any topic that suggested conflict seemed outside the domain that was acceptable discourse for teachers. One high school teacher told us that her students were mature and had outgrown racism. Therefore, there was no need to bring it up.

"Being nice," in the Shadow of the Ax

Teachers explained the boundaries of appropriate and inappropriate behaviors as way of keeping themselves out of trouble. They saw the dividing line as personal protection against external sanctions and labelled it "the ax." The danger of the ax was made real in several stories and examples that the teachers shared. One teacher said she did not want to have parents come to school and accuse her of stepping out of bounds. Another teacher said she wouldn't talk about sex in class because most parents would not be happy about it. The teachers spoke of their fear of parents' critique of their work and the reproaches that may lead to a principal's involvement. Parents, they

suggested, would sue teachers for what they considered inappropriate teacher behavior.

Principals, in turn, were seen as the ax wielders. The teachers suggested that they would lose their jobs. Or less overtly, teachers could be reassigned by their principals to a portable classroom in the back lot of the school. The principal might increase the frequency and duration of observations in classrooms, or eliminate merit increases to salary. The principals were seen as capable of harassment.

Jim's ax was in his story about a recent off campus teaching experience. Jim shared the story of a former student's failed grievance, and offered the narrative as rationale for the current heavily structured course. In the case of the instructor and the teachers in the class, no one could provide an example of when the ax had come down. But it was real for each of us.

The Myth of the Ax

The participants in the "first course" provided a clear picture of how imminent and precarious the ax was in our lives as teachers, but we were unable to produce known experiences in which teachers had ben fired, been moved, been more closely supervised, lost merit increase as a result of inappropriate teaching content or behavior. We could not produce an actual incident where parents had come to school to do battle. Yet, we all made our teaching decisions within a comfort zone circumscribed by the blade of a mythological ax.

Once we started to talk about the physical reality of the ax and its mythical status, teachers suggested that principals also contributed to the social construction of the ax as a way to task control and shape teachers' behavior. One teacher mentioned that during her evaluation with her principal, the principal opened his desk drawer, pulled out a bell shaped curve and pointed to her rank in a distribution of teachers' grade allocations. The teacher told her story to show her surprise, her fear, and her naivete that such information was kept and used. The information and its use by the principal in ways that threatened the teacher made the ax.

We used the myth of the ax and the rituals that bring it to life to provide boundaries for "appropriate conduct." The teachers in this class, all of us, had great respect for these boundaries and resisted opportunities for critical examination of their effects.

The Instructor's Part

It is ironic that this study focuses so heavily on my teaching. At the onset, I suspect I planned to snare my student objects in a web, and study them in a "critical context." Yet, the feedback from the Scot and Susan projected the teachers into a larger context, capturing me as I sought to capture the students. So the study became real for me. Most of what I learned was framed in noticeable inconsistencies and conflicts that became apparent. These are some of the many things I learned.

Social relationships are the things that we build upon in class. I monitored my relationship and its quality with each of the ten students. I also kept track of who was connected at any given time in class.

Feelings are difficult for me. While I recognize that emotional states and their articulation are the base for my teaching, I find it difficult to talk with and through them. And further, I expect my students to identify and use their own emotions in their learning in this class, and in their own classes. This finding was very surprising to me. I can trace it to Willensky's (1990) use of Bleich's (1978) reader response theory. A few years ago, I had studied with Bleich. At that time, my intense response to selected writings was a good experience. Later on, when I read found reader response as a classroom pedagogy in Willensky, it seemed a logical choice for a whole language classroom. If, in postmodern teaching, we center on students, then we forsake interpretive authority. Yet I remain troubled by Gilbert's (1988) critique that <u>individualizing</u> response tends to favor male-centered ways of knowing and experiencing literature. For me, the bottom line and my teaching focus for the Master's students became awareness of our emotional lives in classrooms. If certain literary themes are not OK for kids, why not? What are some options? The final surprise was students' consistent refusal to interrogate their personal beliefs.

While I encouraged diversity of opinion and interpretation, I found it difficult to accept conflict in the course. Again, Willensky's portrayal of multiple interpretations suggests that as teachers of literacy, we adopt a multiperspectival approach, encourage diversity, and use perceived difference as a teaching occasion. In our class, I often saw difference as a challenge to me. I tended to respond defensively and counter attack.

Related to my avoidance of conflict is a "be nice" attitude that permeated the class. There were several instances where my needs for harmony preempted discussion based on differences. I get embarrassed when sex and profanity become part of the classroom discourse. I still think that using controversial topics simply for their disruptive effect may create additional tensions in the class, and that the tension itself isn't especially productive for learning. But, my squelching of such talk is often based more on my discomfort than any theoretical critique of its productivity as a learning context.

My perceptions or constructions of "who my student/teachers were," propelled me to an embarrassed response when condoms, intercourse, and sexuality became part of the course. Conflict and negative emotions also moved me to suppress discussion. Yet, these same topics in other social situations provide me laughter, arousal, and excitement. How is it that my conceptions of teacher culture make me embarrassed? I continue to work on this representation of teacher in my work with those I am characterizing.

For me it was an interesting experience of being mentored. I was critiqued by the student researchers who were taking "coursework" with me. I learned to listen to their views of class. From them, I learned about defensiveness, about an asexuality that permeates nice teacher culture, and about how we all participate together in masking and muting topics that cause discomfort because they are construed as "inappropriate."

Overturning our applecart: Self-critique

An important aspect of our struggle to bring our research knowledge to text has been our own constant overturning and disrupting of the very knowledge we had just created. As subjects, we enjoyed decentering ourselves as knowledge-makers, as words full of reflexive irony that characterizes postmodern or critical research (Anderson, 1989; Resaldo, 1989). In this section we demonstrate the deconstructive tenor in our relation to our devaluation of the teachers in the Master's degree program as non-critical educators.

We have described Jim's university teaching emphasis on critical theory as set of philosophical preunderstandings that he used as an approach to teaching and evaluation of his students' learning. While the teachers seemed to comprehend the theory, they did not use a critical stance in their descriptions of their public school work; nor did they use a critical approach to their participation in Jim's course. Consequently,, we depict this group of women falling short of the intellectual and political standards set for the course. They were poor critical theorists.

We further implied that they were unable to make a conceptual link between the pragmatics of nurturing in a world of children and the abstraction of higher education.

Our depiction is problematic. It privledges the university and its priorities on abstract thought over the daily, socially-based understandings of teachers in their public school work. Further, suggesting that little or no abstract analysis occurs on public school sites is itself elitist. While we distanced the course from other top-down university courses in rhetoric and readings, both the instructor and the collaborative researchers retained a stance of valuing university-type knowledge over public school knowledge. The irony lies in the hegemony of a university course that presupposes that teachers should approach their learning from a counterhegemonic position, only to impose the same hegemony.

This critique can be enriched by adding the issue of gender to the mix. We viewed ourselves as supportive of feminist perspectives on education and social analysis. Yet, our construction of gender roles and expectations within our research trio tilted our interpretations of the group of ten women teachers. Within our research trio, Jim and Scot both admired Sue for her outspoken and abrasive style of thinking and interaction. We agreed that Sue's style contested the common professional norms of "appropriate" female behavior and discourse for elementary teachers. Her provocative words and arguments from radical child advocacy stance often left the teachers wide-

eyed and red-faced. Gradually, Jim and Scot constructed Sue as the ideal feminist, a radicalized benchmark for the teachers. The relatively mild mannered teachers seemed to fall short (again), this time in contrast to our construction of the "super feminist."

In our constructions of "difference-based" social realities, we "othered" the teachers. We pushed them to the margins of our critical context based our diagnosis of "lacking in critical fibre." We had theorized ourselves into he very predicament we so passionately wanted the teachers to confront in their own educational work. We understand that this is what we did. We do not understand how "teaching" with an agenda (of any sort) can avoid this paradox of empowerment.

Learning is Engagement

In our discussions, we found that we counted as learning those occasions where the participants were engaged in the context. These occasions were characterized by a sense of "with-it-ness." In engaged situations, the content focus was on issues that the participants agreed were important. The interaction was typically permeated with affect. Lyons (1983) suggests that within such an engagement epistemology, knowledge is created within the intimate connections of persons. Students and teachers may work on cognitive and skills based academic task. Yet, they meet also on a shared affective and morally constructed plane. One can view the construction of relationship as an alternate teaching reality that occurs in the context of academic

space. We felt that such view provided social engagement and with it a moral, ethical dimension.

From a literacy content perspective, engagement was a primary component of the new literacy philosophy of the course. In reading texts as a classroom practice, it is the interpretation of the meanings, at all levels and from multiple perspectives that is the valued outcome of pedagogy (Bleich, 1978; Willensky, 1990). Similarly, in writing, it is the use of students' innermost beliefs as an occasion for literacy that is the dynamo that drives the writing process (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1991; Graves, 1983). It is clear that teachers' empathic response and connectedness with students' emotional lives take on important roles in the new literacy.

Teachers' involvement in the personal lives of their students is problematic. Gilbert (1988) and Long (1987) remind us that textual and social interpretations, however well they are intentioned, may reproduce the hegemonies that they potentially serve to deconstruct. We thought this was especially possible in elementary classrooms, where students live with a single adult for a great deal of time. If implicit cultural valuing (or even explicit) are not unpacked when they occur as part of the stories or as part of the interpretations, then social inequalities such as classism, racism, and heterosexism, go unexamined and are essentially reproduced as part of the story interpretation. In the current power relationships of classrooms, teachers own some of the responsibility for reproducing these social inequities.

References

Anderson, G. (1989). Critical ethnography in education: Origins, current status, and new direction. Review of Educational Research, 59, 249-270.

Atwell, N. (1987). In the middle: Writing, reading and learning with adolescents. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. (1982). Qualitative research in education: An introduction to theory and methods.

Bleich, D. (1978). Subjective criticism. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Calkins, L. (1991). Living between the lines. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Clarke, M. (1990). Some cautionary observations on liberation education. Language Arts, 67, 388-398.

Clifford, J. (1988). The predicament of culture. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ellsworth, E. (1989). Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the myths of critica;l pedagogy. Harvard Educational Review, 59, 297-324.

Ferguson, P., Ferguson, D., & Taylor, S. (1992). In P. Ferguson, D. Ferguson, & S. Taylor (Eds.), Interpreting disability: A Qualitative reader (pp. 1-11). New York: Teachers College Press.

Gilbert, P. (1988). Student text as pedagogical text. In S. de Castell, A. Luke, & C. Luke (Eds.), Language, authority, and

criticism: Readings in the school textbook (pp. 234-250). NY: Falmer Press.

Giroux, H. (1987). Critical literacy and student experience: Donald Graves' approach to literacy. Language Arts, 67, 175-181.

Graves, D. (1983). Writing: Teachers and students at work. Portsmouth, NY: Heinemann.

Hammersley, M. (1992). What's wrong with ethnography? New York: Routledge.

Lewis, M. & Simon, R. (1986). A discourse not intended for her: Learning and teaching within patriarchy: Harvard Educational Review, 56, 457-472.

Long, E. (1987). Reading groups and the crisis of cultural authority. Cultural Studies, 1, 306-327.

Lyons, N. (1983). Two perspectives on self, relationships, and morality. Harvard Educational Review, 53, 125-145.

Resaldo, R. (1989). Culture and truth. Boston: Beacon Press.

Shannon, P. (1989). Broken promises. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey.

Willensky, J. (1990). The new literacy. New York: Routledge.